

Ep #74: Embracing Larger Spaces

Can't
wait
to hear
you
with
Michèle Voillequé

Full Episode Transcript

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Your voice is unique to you. It grows as you grow. It changes as you change. If you're curious about the relationship between your voice and your body, your heart and your mind, welcome. My name is Michèle Voillequé and I can't wait to hear you.

Today's episode is Part Four of Leading When You're Not In Charge. Last time, I talked about expanding our capacity, particularly for conflict, for feeling safe in a group of people, for feeling like we belong.

And today I want to extend that a little bit and talk about expanding our capacity to feel safe in large groups and even in front of large groups.

Now I know that “leading when you're not in charge” implies that you are not the front person, you're not the person in front leading everyone. But as we develop the capacity for leadership within ourselves, self-leadership and influence over others, it's really helpful if we are not terrified of being in front of other people, of playing that role of a leader, even when that isn't our current situation.

A lot of us sing in choruses and don't sing solos, don't sing on our own elsewhere, because we like the feeling of being in the group. There's a safety there.

I don't have to know exactly what the note is. I can wait a second and listen and see what other people sing and then I can join in.

I don't have to worry about being heard over a large orchestra. I know that I can add my voice to the group, and together we are going to make a joyful noise that is going to move other people and make other people happy.

I don't have to stick out. In fact, I don't wanna stick out.

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These are thoughts, these are sentences that come out of the mouths of my students a lot and came out of my mouth for a long time before I figured out that I was a singer, a solo singer, and a teacher, and was in fact going to lead in this area.

But I did spend time in chorus not wanting anybody to see me, not wanting anybody to hear me. I just kind of wanted to be there and be invisible.

And that is a fine thing. I don't mean to imply it's not a fine thing, but if you're listening to these episodes about leading when you're not in charge and you're a little bit curious about what that could mean, I want to tell you that, after cultivating a sense of belonging, and safety being in the group, the next step is to cast your imagination a little bit wider.

So maybe when you're singing with the chorus, your eyes are on the conductor. Good for you. And you do your best to ignore the fact that there's an audience, to ignore the fact that you're in a sizable space.

Maybe it only seats a hundred people. Maybe it seats 400 people, but it's bigger than a living room, and those people are over there, and maybe that freaks you out a little bit. Maybe you do your best to ignore the fact that the audience is there.

Maybe you ask your family to sit outside of your line of sight or you resist telling them where you're going to be on stage because you know that they're gonna plant themselves right in front of you.

So maybe you say, “you know, we're still working it out,” or “I think I'm gonna be somewhere kind of on the left,” but you're not really specific.

Or maybe you are really specific and you want to be able to see the faces of your loved ones because it brings you comfort when you're singing. That too, is a beautiful thing.

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So whatever it is for you, if you're diminishing the size of the audience in your mind, if you're doing your best to ignore it or just simply not acknowledge its truth, it's reality, I want to suggest at your next rehearsal that you cast your mind, cast your eye about the entire space.

And when you're singing, although you're still singing in your section, still looking at the conductor, I want you to hold that entire space in your mind and imagine that your voice is filling that entire space. I don't mean sing louder, I mean cultivate a larger presence and see if that's something that you can get used to.

I said something that just sounded kind of California-woo, and I want to clarify. When I say “cultivate a larger presence,” one of the things I learned from living in California is there are mountain lions and there are mountain lions in urban areas.

Like, I can go for a walk, up in the hills or out in the park, in Berkeley, and I could see a mountain lion. And they tell you the thing to do when you see a mountain lion is not run, but make yourself as big as possible: stretch out your arms, maybe make a sound, but make yourself as big as possible.

That's what I'm talking about when I'm saying “increasing your presence.” With regard to a mountain lion, it certainly, it's your physical presence. It's expanding your torso, stretching out your arms, but it's also an energetic presence.

One of the qualities that effective leaders have is that they are using their body, they're using their psyche in a way that is leading, too. They're not schlumpy, their shoulders aren't collapsed, their chest is, isn't close to their tummy. They're standing in a way, they are being in a way, even if they're not standing, they are radiating a sense of personal empowerment, of strength, of calm, of groundedness.

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And you can get along in a group and never have to do that. And I find that it has helped me in cultivating this presence to imagine myself in a bigger space, to imagine myself leading more than just myself, more than just one person.

Not because I was gonna go out and go lead a group of people, but what would it be like? How would I carry myself if that were the case?

And so if you happen to rehearse in a larger space and you never pay much attention to the space, start paying attention to the space and making it your business to fill it up, to let your energy and your voice reach all the way to the end of it.

This is more an advanced vocal technique, but your voice can reach all the way to the end of it while you're singing pianissimo. That is possible. That's how really quiet singing happens in the opera house.

Now, if you're not rehearsing in a particularly large space, or you're not a singer and you're just looking for other images, other places, consider the grocery store.

Every grocery store is laid out kind of the same and kind of different. I find that there are places in the grocery store, like on the edges of the store where the produce is or where the bakery is, or sometimes it's where all of the meat counters are, where there's a spaciousness about them.

You're not in an aisle and there are tall shelves on either side, but there's a bit of an expanse that you can look across. And as you're doing your shopping, noticing that space. Noticing all of those vegetables. Noticing all of that food. And if you were to embrace all of that with your being, how would you carry yourself?

If you were to encourage all of that in some way, whether I don't, maybe "encouraging vegetables" doesn't make much sense to you, but if you

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can feel that space and imagine that it's full of people that need encouragement, and it might be if you're shopping at rush hour, how would you carry yourself to encourage all of those people?

If you were going to say something that was going to reach them and meet them where they were at and have an impact, a positive impact on their life, how would you be in your body?

Again, you don't have to do any of this. This is playing in the imagination. This it's not even acting “as if” it's actually “playing as if,” and noticing what that's like for you.

This might not be fun at all. This might be a real stretch. It might give you the heebie-jeebies. It might be like, “oh, okay, I thought I was going to be able to sustain that for 30 seconds. And I tried it for five and I was over it. Not a good, not an easy task.”

So notice what it's like for yourself. Even if you never intend to lead a group of people, feeling comfortable with larger spaces and with larger numbers of people will help you lead when you're not in charge, because you won't be afraid of visibility, you won't be afraid of the crowd or dependent on the crowd to love you.

You can see yourself as slightly separate from the group and still feel safe. That's what we're going for here.

Other large spaces that you might have access to that you could try this out in – maybe a conference room where you work, maybe a theater, maybe a basketball court, a stadium or a field of any kind.

Standing on the pitchers mound, even if it's a tiny little baseball field. You know, like for seven and eight year olds where it's not 90 feet between the bases, it's 60 feet or maybe even less. Stand on that pitcher's mound, no intention of throwing any balls anywhere, but just stand there

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and feel what is it like to fill up that space?

Okay, so the next step, or maybe the first step, depending on what's easier for you, I'm not convinced that these have to go in the order that I'm presenting them.

Another step is to imagine what the leader of the group is seeing from their vantage point. So, back to the chorus – imagining what the conductor is seeing from the podium.

What is their life like? Well, no, not what is their life like, that's way too big a question. But what does it look like for them from where they are? And if you arrive at rehearsal early, you can check that out yourself.

Maybe not stand on the podium. Maybe there isn't a podium, maybe there's just a music stand where the conductor would be, but just notice what's the view from there like, and take that in.

Or if it's work and you're on a Zoom call, what's the view for the presenter or the person who's running the meeting? Or in person in a conference room. What's the view like for the person who's running the meeting? What do they see? What do they see that you don't see?

This is another way of expanding your capacity, expanding your imagination, expanding your understanding of what's happening in the space that isn't just what's immediately around you, but what the leader actually sees.

And also, what does the leader receive from the group?

It's not always easy to be a conductor or to be running a meeting, and it's also not always hard. In fact, people continue to do it because they enjoy it more than they hate it.

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Even if you're in a situation where the leader seems really grumpy all the time, they're getting something out of it. Now, knock on wood that it's something positive, and for the sake of this podcast, I'm going to assume they're deriving some positive benefit, some positive emotion, there's a net win for them in this situation. That's benevolent and good for the universe too.

So the exercise is to put yourself in the leader's position and ask, "What good are they receiving?" Is it smiling faces? Is it well-sung notes? Is it attention? Is it love? Is it caring? Is it good work? Is it positive feedback or helpful problem solving collaborative work? What's it like to be sitting or standing where they are with all of whatever coming toward them?

What is that like?

And how might that be fueling for them? How might that be encouraging? How might that be strengthening for them?

I think when we can imagine leadership as something that has some kind of mutuality in it, it's not just that there's somebody there in power telling you everything you need to do and how you need to do it, and like there's a glass wall in front of them and nothing that anyone else says or does, reaches them.

I know a lot of organizations can feel like that, but more often than not, in smaller settings, in musical settings, in settings where people are there because they're sensitive. To make good music, you have to be open and sensitive and listening and available for feedback.

So what is it like, in that kind of environment, to be in the position of the leader where they're receiving that from multiple people?

When we're just in a chorus, as a chorister, the only feedback we may be aware of is from the conductor themselves, or from the sense of being in

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the group. But it's a different thing to be in the conductor's position, to be in the facilitator's position, and cast your mind there and imagine what that's like, and imagine how that could be okay, even amazing.

Again, you don't have to do it. This isn't acting “as if” this is pretending, “as if.” What we're doing is we're expanding your imagination. We're expanding your idea of what might be possible for you. What kinds of emotions, what kinds of feedback, what kinds of energies might you be available for and wanting?

When you can step into that version of yourself it makes leading when you're not in charge that much easier and I think that much more fulfilling.

I really hope this is helpful. Please as always, let me know.

Thank you so much for listening.

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